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| **Drought ends as Verlander earns well-deserved AL MVP award** | Story Highlights  **Justin Verlander is the first pitcher since 1992 to win a league MVP award**  **Pedro Martinez and Randy Johnson are among pitchers overlooked by MVP voters**  **Other top candidates for this award had significant hurdles they couldn't overcome** |

**Tom Verducci says Justin Verlander's win could open the door for future pitchers to be MVP.**

**http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2011/writers/cliff\_corcoran/11/21/justin.verlander.al.mvp/index.html?hpt=hp\_t2**

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For the first time in 19 years a pitcher has won the Most Valuable Player award. Justin Verlander, who was the unanimous winner of the American League Cy Young award last week, received 13 of 28 first-place votes for AL MVP to win an expectedly close race by just 38 points over the Red Sox' Jacoby Ellsbury. In doing so, Verlander became the first pitcher to win an MVP since A's closer Dennis Eckersley in 1992 and the first starting pitcher to win one since the Red Sox' Roger Clemens in 1986.

One might immediately assume from that history that Verlander's season was the best by a starting pitcher since Clemens' performance 25 years ago, but that's far from the case. There have been several pitchers in each league who have been deserving MVP candidates in the years since Clemens and Eckersley won the award, some of whom have had very similar seasons to the one Verlander just had, but for one reason or another they didn't win.

For example, Verlander would seem like an ideal MVP candidate because he won the pitching triple crown for a team that made the playoffs, but so did Johan Santana in 2006, Randy Johnson in 2002 and Pedro Martinez in 1999, and none of them won their league's MVP. Nor did Sandy Koufax, who in 1965 and 1966, accomplished the same feat for pennant-winning Dodgers teams. From the list of the greatest pitching seasons in the AL since the addition of the designated hitter in 1973 that I posted in my piece on Verlander's Cy Young win last week, Roger Clemens' 1990 season and Ron Guidry's 1978 season both came for first-place teams, but neither of them won the MVP either.

Some of those are easy to explain. Johnson in 2002, Clemens in 1990 and Koufax in 1965 may have been the best pitchers in their leagues, but were not the best players, losing the MVP legitimately to great seasons by, respectively, Barry Bonds (.370/.582/.799, 46 HRs, 110 RBIs), Rickey Henderson (.325/.439/.577, 28 HRs, 119 R, 65 SBs) and Willie Mays (.317/.398/.645, 52 HRs, 112 RBIs). Guidry had a better argument in 1978 but lost a close vote to a monster season from Jim Rice (.315/.370/.600, 46 HRs, 139 RBIs, 213 H, 121 R, 406 TB).

More problematic were the results in the NL in 1966 and the AL in 1999 and 2006. In 1966, Koufax actually received the most first-place votes for NL MVP, but lost by just 10 points (out of the total 1,180 awarded that year) to Roberto Clemente, who had a typically strong but not exceptional (at least by his own standards) season -- ranking seventh in the league in Baseball-Reference's Wins Above Replacement (bWAR) -- for a third-place Pirates team. That suggests some down-ballot shenanigans coast Koufax an award he should have won.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The results in the AL in 1999 were very similar, with Martinez receiving one more first-place vote than winner Ivan Rodriguez, but losing by 13 points because two writers, George King of the *New York Post* and LaVelle Neal of the Minneapolis *Star-Tribune*, left him off their ballots entirely. The same thing happened to Tom Seaver in 1969. Both times, the offending writers reasoning was, to use King's words, "pitchers have their own award," meaning the Cy Young. Never mind that the MVP instructions explicitly point out to voters that "all players are eligible for MVP, including pitchers."

That doesn't even begin to explain what happened to Santana in 2006, however, when he finished seventh on the ballot with just one first-place vote. What's more, that lone first-place vote was one of just two given to any pitcher in the years between Martinez being robbed in 1999 and Verlander winning this year (the other went to closer Francisco Rodriguez in 2008 when he set the single-season saves record). Randy Johnson didn't get a first place vote in 2002 because Bonds was the unanimous winner of the MVP, but Johnson didn't finish second either. Like Santana, the Big Unit finished seventh, despite a season that was even better than the one Verlander just turned in:

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| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Pitcher | Year | W-L | ERA | ERA+ | IP | Ks | | Johnson | 2002 | 24-5 | 2.32 | 197 | 260 | 334 | | Verlander | 2011 | 24-5 | 2.40 | 170 | 251 | 250 | |

That result wasn't about rogue voters leaving pitchers off their ballots or even about how the game had titled heavily toward hitting during that period. It was about a widespread attitude that pitchers were not to be treated as legitimate MVP candidates, most likely because they had their own award. Indeed, other than Martinez, who finished second in 1999 and fifth in 2000, the last pitcher to finish higher than sixth on an MVP ballot was Orioles closer Randy Myers, who finished fourth in 1997, and the last starter to do so was Greg Maddux, who finished third in 1995, a season when he, too, should have won the award.

So what changed? Why did the writers suddenly see fit to give a pitcher 13 first-place votes this year after stiffing better seasons by some of the greatest hurlers in major league history? It could just be, [as I wrote last Friday](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2011/writers/cliff_corcoran/11/18/mvp.walkup/index.html), that every other candidate's case came with at least one critical flaw that removed them from the running. Ellsbury, who finished second, played for a team that suffered one of the worst collapses in baseball history. Third-place finisher Jose Bautista played for a fourth-place Blue Jays team. Curtis Granderson, who finished fourth, had an awful September and finished with a .262 batting average. Fifth-place Miguel Cabrera, conversely, goosed his numbers with a monster September after the Tigers had effectively iced the division and offers little value outside the batter's box, not to mention the fact that his off-season trouble with the law could be seen as a detriment in light of criteria number three in the official instructions ("general character, disposition").

Already six voters have annotated their ballots on-line, and just three of them listed Verlander first. Ken Rosenthal of Fox Sports went with Ellsbury first and Verlander second. Marc Topkin of the *St. Petersburg Times* listed Curtis Granderson first, Ellsbury second, and Verlander third. Both expressed a reluctance to give the award to a pitcher. Evan Grant of the *Dallas Morning News* listed Rangers DH/infielder Michael Young first, the only writer to do so, and has drawn heavy criticism as a result of that misplaced vote.

The other three, Fox Sports' Jon Morosi, the *Boston Globe*'s Peter Abraham, and the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*'s Joe Christensen, all listed Verlander first and Ellsbury second, though for somewhat different reasons. Morosi simply thought Verlander had the best season. Abraham admitted that he had never put a pitcher higher than sixth on any of his three previous MVP ballots and only did so this year because "I didn't feel strongly about any of the other choices." Christensen, meanwhile, wrote that "it was a tough call -- especially after the Red Sox choked on the final night of the season." That last suggests that Christensen would have had Ellsbury first and Verlander second had the Red Sox won the wild card, and I suspect Christensen isn't alone in having made that switch.

It would be unfair to say Verlander won the MVP by default. He was a deserving candidate. He won the pitching triple crown, was the unanimous Cy Young award winner, was a central reason for the Tigers' somewhat unexpected division title and tied for the league lead in bWAR. There should be no complaint about his having won it. It's only in light of the historical voting patterns of the Baseball Writers Association of America that his win seems like an aberration. Really, it was all of the previous votes that buried great pitching seasons behind lesser performances by hitters that were problematic.

In that way, Verlander's MVP win should be seen as a victory for clear thinking, even if you feel that Ellsbury or Bautista (my choice) or whomever else should have won it. Verlander absolutely deserved to be in that top five and to receive multiple first-place votes, and for the first time since 1999, a pitcher turned in an MVP-quality season that was properly reflected on the MVP ballot. That looks like progress to me.

1. I have not yet been able to locate vote totals which would reveal the shenanigans, but note that they could have been of two sorts.  They might have consisted of insincere strategic voting against Koufax, which would be shenanigans properly so-called.  But Koufax’s loss could have been the result of his being placed near the bottom of ballots cast by voters who sincerely believed that pitchers should not win the MVP because the Cy Young Award recognizes their achievements.  The ambiguity illustrates an important point:  the same anomalous outcome can result from either sincere or insincere voting.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)